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AUTHOR Couch, Richard A.
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ABSTRACT

Background information about gender inequity is provided, and the assertion is made that educators must recognize that many of the problems females encounter are begun and perpetuated in the schools. Visual literacy is part of the change that schools must make in order to make greater strides toward gender equity. Two connections between visual literacy and gender equity are female images and the exploitation of those images in popular media, and the portrayal of gender stereotypes in textbooks and children's literature. Five factors contribute to the unequal treatment of females in children's literature: (1) male bias in career preparation and reading material; (2) peculiarities in the English language, such as the use of male pronouns when no gender is indicated; (3) sexist literary heritage and the glorification of the male in traditional literature; (4) the preponderance of male artists; and (5) the sexuality of women's bodies. Recommended global changes include: make schools cooperative rather than competitive; confront "isms" in an upfront manner; focus on equity; begin early and be patient; change standardized testing; eliminate tracking; and don't use visuals that contain gender bias. Recommended specific changes can affect gender equity both in and outside of the schools: dispel stereotypes; increase self-confidence; use classroom peer pressure in a positive way; encourage cooperation; provide female role models; adjust the sense of dependency of some female students; encourage female students to play with typically male toys; and choose and use appropriate literature and textbooks. (Contains 8 references.) (MAS)

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Gender Equity & Visual Literacy: Schools Can Help Change Perceptions

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Richard A. Couch

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Gender equity is a very complex issue. A recent survey studied the interaction of self-esteem with education and career aspirations in adolescent girls and boys. It was conducted by Greenberg-Lake: The Analysis Group (1991) and commissioned by the American Association of University Women. The survey reflects the dramatic societal changes in the last twenty years. Most young people assume that women will combine a job outside the home with their job inside the home. Even more girls than boys think they could enter certain professions; the most common choice was law. "These changes in gender perception, and broad potential for even greater changes with a better understanding of the reciprocal relationships between schools and young women students, are among the brightest findings of the survey" (Greenberg-Lake, 1991, p.17).

However, as pointed out in a report in the *Women's Educational Equity Act Digest* (1990), girls are still significantly underrepresented in high school math and science courses. Many females never take electives or advanced courses in either field.

Statistics show that poverty is still the "female disease." In 1988, 62 percent of all people 16 years of age or older living under the poverty line were women. Women still make only 70 cents for every dollar made by men. The median income of women who work year round full time, was $17,606 in 1988; men made $26,656. Most women are working because of economic need as heads of households or in families where income is less than $15,000. Additionally, many of the gains made by women as a whole over the last two decades have not translated for women of color. Women with two barriers, gender and minority race or ethnicity face more burdens. The average African American woman makes $16,538 and the average Latina only $14,845. The unemployment rate for African-American women is 9.8%; White men, 3.9% and White women, 4.0%. (African-American men top the list at 10%.) "In the workforce, while laws have helped eliminate some barriers to women in nontraditional vocations, at the rate women are currently entering these fields, it will take between 75 and 100 years to achieve a fully integrated workforce. Most women are still found in low-status, low-paying 'pink-collar' jobs" (p. 2).

This country has already begun

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to see what can happen when barriers to women are reduced: more women scientists, mathematicians, college presidents, scholars, entrepreneurs, corporate executives, politicians as well as women who are well paid blue collar workers. However, we as educators need to recognize that many of the problems that females encounter are begun and perpetuated in the schools. We must change the way we teach and the way schools operate in order to make even greater strides toward gender equity. Visual literacy is part of the change which is necessary. The remainder of this article will focus on gender equity and visual literacy.

Twenty years after educational equity was mandated in the Educational Amendment of 1972, it continues to be unresolved in the school environment. Teachers continue to have gender bias in their professional practices, teacher training has not addressed gender equity and teachers are unaware of their own biases. Gender equity has improved in the areas of textbooks and other instructional materials, however those media have to compete with the popular media including television which is constantly bombarding our senses with gender stereotypes and exploitation which perpetuate myth and bias.

Visual Literacy and Gender Equity

Two obvious connections between visual literacy and gender equity are 1) female images and the exploitation of those images in the popular media and 2) the portrayal of gender stereotypes in textbooks and children's literature. When you pick up a magazine it is evident that "sex sells" and that women's sexuality is used to sell products. The role of a woman in television's sitcoms, dramatic series and commercials is often stereotypical -- she is always pretty if not very smart or she often needs to be protected by men.

Weitzman (1972) stated that picture books significantly affect early sex role socialization because they present societal values to young children. Books show children how other boys and girls think and act. Children also find role models in books that represent what children can and should be in their lives. Teachers in Kansas and Texas were asked to list their favorite books to read aloud to children. This study revealed that these teachers read aloud twice as many books with male main characters (43%) as female main characters (21%). The most popular books included few female protagonists (15%). The images of female characters were often negative and narrowly defined. The images of boys were generally positive but were restricted to stereotypical portrayals (Smith, Greenlaw & Scott, 1987).

Nilsen (1978) pointed out five factors which contribute to the unequal treatment of females in children's picture books:
1) Male bias in career preparation and reading material.
2) Peculiarities in the English language. Confusion exists in English because man and alternate forms such as fellow, master, father, and patron are sometimes used to mean male,

exclusive of female. At other times these words may mean human -- both male and female. Because the more common meaning of man is the exclusively male meaning, it may be that when artists are asked to illustrate a book about cavemen or founding fathers, their minds are subconsciously triggered to think of them only as males. Masculine pronouns is another area where confusion abounds. There are no singular neutral pronouns similar to the plural "they", "their" and "them," except for the formal and awkward sounding "one" and "it." We have learned that when the sex is unknown, we should use "he" or "him." "Seventeen of the 98 Caldecott books feature animals as main characters, but none of these animals is female. Yet there is no real reason that such characters as Swimmy, Sylvester, Frederick, Alexander, and Frog and Toad could not have been female, except that once an author uses a masculine pronoun, the commitment by the illustrator is to follow through with male clothing and accessories" (p.257).
3) Sexist literary heritage. Since many of the Caldecott winners are based on traditional tales, this tendency to glorify the male role is especially obvious. *"Anansi the Spider* is a good example of the difference between reality and literary tradition. Gerald McDermott begins the book by introducing the spider Anansi and saying that 'He had six sons,' where, in reality, a father spider is nowhere around when new spiders are hatched (and even if he were, it is highly unlikely that his offspring would be exclusively male)" (p. 257).
4) The preponderance of male artists. In ninety-eight Caldecott winners surveyed, half the writers were female and half were male, but of the artists who illustrated the books, men outnumbered women two to one.
5) The sexuality of women's bodies. Nilsen feels that it is difficult to draw a discreet picture of the female body. Their sexual attractiveness works against their inclusion in illustrations in books where it is appropriate like books about art, health, the human body, and primitive or prehistoric peoples (Nilsen, 1978).

Is this a deliberate process to exclude women or to perpetuate gender stereotypes? Certainly not in most cases. Teachers do not intentionally perpetuate gender role stereotyping by choosing books with only male characters. Writers and artists don't deliberately exclude female characters. The question now becomes, how do we as educators change the status quo.

What can we do to improve gender equity?

With the help of parents and teachers, schools can be the focus of the necessary changes in the way we deal with gender equity. However, there are two areas where schools must begin to change: global changes and specific changes.

Global Changes in Schools to Address Gender Equity

What kind of changes are necessary to make our schools more gender equal?
• Change schools to a more cooperative rather than competitive

environment.

• Confront "isms" head on. Deal with racism, sexism, bias, and stereotyping in an upfront manner. Don't accept any trace of these "isms" from students, other teachers or parents.

• Focus on equity and excellence will follow.

• Begin early. Equity in parenting and early childhood is essential.

• Be patient. The devastating effects of generations of gender bias cannot be undone immediately.

• Include both males and females in the reformation. Encourage boys to look for alternative careers as well as girls.

• Disseminate knowledge so that others can grow. Read the research on gender equity and discuss it with teachers and parents (WEEA Digest, 1991).

• Change standardized testing. Many standardized tests are biased in favor of white, middle class, male students. Use tests that truly measure a child's ability including writing samples and problem solving. We need to quit making local and national policy decisions about education based on whether the national average of SAT scores have gone up or down.

•Eliminate tracking. Tracking is the segregation of students according to career goals -- usually college prep, vocational, and others. The use of tracking pigeonholes students. Tracking may begin in grade school and once a student is in a specific track, it is very difficult to get out. Tracking also affects self concept. It affects the rigorousness of your education as well. One recent study has pointed out that tracking is often the result of socioeconomic and other factors and not the result of cognitive ability. A recent Stanford study reported in the October 1994 issue of *Teacher Magazine* found that as many as one-fifth of the white students who scored well on standardized tests and aspired to go on to college had been "misplaced" in lower-track courses. The proportion of high-ability African-American and Latino students who were not taking college prep courses in mathematics and science was more than twice that of White and Asian-American students. Many students and their parents don't even know if they are in the college prep classes or not. The disparity also exists for females.

•change or don't use visuals that contain gender bias.

Specific Changes Which Can Affect Gender Equity in the Schools and Elsewhere

• Dispel stereotypes. To address the adverse affects of stereotypical attitudes, teachers can provide examples of females in anecdotes, in math story problems, on bulletin boards and in discussions. Use girls' experiences to show that girls can be successful in mathematics and science. Counselors and parents must encourage girls to take courses in mathematics, science and technology. There are nearly twice as many technical jobs making use of mathematics, science, and technology applications as there are professional jobs that require them.

• Increase self-confidence. Females need a great deal of practice in nontraditional tasks in order to become confident in their abilities. Computer software can offer anonymous support for this kind of

remediation. Structure classes so that all children succeed. Work on equitable distribution of questions and tasks within each classroom. Work on developing in the students a sense of process rather than product. How you get to the solution is just as important as the right answer. By focusing on the process, teachers eliminate the students' fear of getting the wrong answer, a common tendency for female students.

• Use peer pressure as a positive aspect in the classroom. Find ways to make success in mathematics, science and technology a high status outcome. Create clubs and support groups for females that focus on their interests. Sports clubs have started to do this for those girls involved.

•Enhance the learning environment. Encourage cooperation. Allow girls to perform traditional male jobs and allow boys to perform traditional female jobs. Develop gender neutral games and activities. Work on the use of your language as a tool to encourage nonsexist attitudes. Choose appropriate learning materials.

• Provide female role models in person, in literature and in textbooks. Invite professional and blue collar women into class to discuss their jobs.

• Point out the relevance of what you teach especially in mathematics, science and technology. This is helpful for all students but seems to especially benefit females.

• Adjust the sense of dependency in some female students. Students need to realize that they are personally responsible for their successes and failures. When a teacher hears a student demeaning his or her own ability or escaping personal responsibility, the teacher should address the comment to help the student see their responsibility (Fear-Fenn & Kapostasy, 1992).

• Encourage female students to play with typically male toys. Allow them to play with toys which develop mathematical and spatial skills such as blocks, sand, dirt, climbing and construction type activities (Olivares & Rosenthal, 1992).

• Choose and use appropriate literature and textbooks. Is the protagonist male or female? Do the illustrations portray males as active doers and females as inactive observers? Are sex roles an integral part of the plot or characterization? Are the accomplishments of females based on appearance or relationships with males or on their own intelligence and initiative? Are females primarily subservient in this story or textbook? What effect will a book have on a girl's self-concept if it portrays boys as the only ones who perform brave deeds? How will self-image be affected if a girl does not measure up to the beauty standards of children's books? Does sexist language exist, e.g. mankind rather than humankind or forefathers rather than ancestors? Include books which portray active, adventurous females, in which female roles such as housekeeping and childcare are balanced with males taking care of the house and children. Look for books that depict females in occupations other than housekeeping. Include books which depict males in non-stereotyped roles. Balance the use of books which have male and female protagonists (Creany, 1993).

•Teach visual literacy and critical viewing. Teach children about

popular media including television and print material. Teach children how the visual images affect their attitudes and bias. Teach students to recognize the manipulation of popular media. Discuss and dispel stereotypes which appear on television and in magazines. Teach children how to recognize and reject exploitive visual information. Teach children how to be critical observers of popular culture.

Conclusions

Gender equity is not a trivial issue. Changes have taken place in the last few decades, however the following statistics indicate that there is a long road ahead in order to achieve real gender equity.

- By 1988, there were over 100,000 female doctors in the U.S., more than twice the number as in 1975.
- By 1990, women represented 40% if all executives, managers and administrators.
- In 1986, women earned 30% of the degrees in the physical sciences, mathematics, life sciences and social sciences.
- In 1985, the percentage of women earning B.S. degrees in engineering was almost 14%, compared to 0.3% in 1960.
- Women now constitute 20% of all dentists, 40% of all veterinarians, and 50% of all pharmacists.

However, women still constitute large proportions of workers in traditionally female occupations.

- In 1989, 80% of all administrative support (mostly clerical) workers were women.
- In 1989, women were only 9% of precision production, craft, and repair workers and only 7.2% of the apprentices.
- Women accounted for 45% of the workforce and will remain in the labor force almost as long as men.

We all need to be aware of the need for gender equity. It is easy to talk about but difficult to accomplish. I encourage you to become part of the solution rather than continue to perpetuate the problem of gender equity.

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